

JODI TAYLOR

'A true page-turner'
SF Revu

SHIPS AND STINGS
AND WEDDING RINGS
A ST MARY'S SHORT STORY

Meet the disaster-magnets of St Mary's
as they hurtle around History ...

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Ships and Stings and Wedding Rings

A Christmas short story from The Chronicles of
St Mary's Series

Jodi Taylor

It's Christmas again at St Mary's and time for Max's obligatory illegal jump. On this occasion, however, they're right up against it.

A loaded gun has been left behind in Ancient Egypt and it's up to St Mary's historians to retrieve it before someone accidentally blows their own head off, thus affecting the timeline for centuries to come. And as if that's not enough, Max has inadvertently poisoned Mr Markham.

It's hot, they're running out of supplies, they can't find the gun, and it's all going horribly wrong. Again.

Acknowledgements

Thanks, as always, to my editor, Cat Camacho.

Thanks to Suzie for her comments and encouragement. And special thanks to Phillip Dawson who kept me right about the Glock.

List of Characters

Dr Edward Bairstow	Doesn't actually appear in this tale but is about to be very cross indeed.
Dr Maxwell	Chief Operations Officer. Head of the History Department. Trying to put things right.
Dr Tim Peterson	Potential Deputy Director. Determined to be involved.
Mr Markham	Security Guard. Currently flirting with the diseased transvestite look.
Miss Elspeth Grey	Historian. It's not really her fault.
Major Ian Guthrie	Head of Security. A man with a decision to make.
Mr Tom Bashford	Historian. <i>Not</i> concussed. A bit of a first.
Mr Cox	Security Guard. Should have been more vigilant.
Mr Gallaccio	Ditto.
Dr Helen Foster	Chief Medical Officer. As warm and compassionate as pneumonic plague. That's the other sort and even more deadly.
Chief Leon Farrell	Chief Technical Officer. Max's husband. Hero.
Nurse Hunter	Recipient of Mr Markham's affections.
Mr Phil	Atherton Historian. Probably up to no good because that's what historians get up to.
Miss Elizabeth Sykes	Ditto.
Rupert	Markham's special little friend.
Snowman	With an oddly placed carrot.
A stallholder	With an eye for a bargain.
Sundry children	Dirty, sticky, crusty, dusty – the list just goes on and on.
Egyptian labourers	An unspecified number. Almost naked. Glistening. Muscular. Strong. Using the ability to type ... May have to lie down.

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Years ago, when I first came to St Mary's, Chief Farrell said, 'You get a feel for when things have gone wrong,' and he was right. You do. So when Grey, Bashford, Cox, and Gallaccio stepped out of their pod, one look was all I needed to see that something had happened.

I stood quietly while they were ushered off to Sick Bay for the statutory check-up, waited for everyone else to disappear, and then followed on behind.

'Why are you here?' said Nurse Hunter to me, ushering Bashford into an examination room. 'Is everything all right?'

'Absolutely fine,' I said. 'Why shouldn't it be?'

'You're here voluntarily, that's why.'

'I'm just checking up on my people. They've returned from a vital and important assignment and I want to debrief them as soon as possible.'

She consulted her scratchpad. 'Are you sure? They've only been checking out shipbuilding in ... Ancient Egypt.'

'Quite sure,' I said firmly. 'Where's Grey?'

She nodded in the direction of the women's ward.

Elspeth Grey was sitting in the window seat, staring at the snow falling silently outside. She turned her head as I entered and I knew I was right. Something had gone wrong. From the look on her face, something had gone badly wrong.

This wasn't unknown. We're St Mary's – something always goes wrong. To give us our full title, we're the Institute of Historical Research, based at St Mary's Priory just outside Rushford. We investigate major historical events in contemporary time. We don't ever call it time travel because our lives are hazardous enough without deliberately calling down the wrath of our boss, Dr Bairstow, upon ourselves.

Grey and her team had returned from Ancient Egypt and something had happened. I was at a bit of a loss. They all seemed relatively intact to me. Very sunburned, obviously and with hair like straw, but no one was missing a vital body part, or leaking vast amounts of body fluids everywhere. I had a horrible feeling this was more serious than simple physical injury.

I dragged up a chair. 'What's happened?'

She was so pale that I was surprised Hunter hadn't shoved her back into the scanner again.

She said quietly, 'I've done something terrible, Max,' and stopped, unable to go on.

Many terrible things can happen to historians. It was obviously up

to me to whittle them down a bit.

I said, 'Is anyone dead?' and waited for her hasty denial.

It didn't come.

I felt myself grow cold. The team was all present and as correct as St Mary's was ever able to achieve, which only left ...

'Elspeth. Is someone dead?' I took a deep breath. 'Did you – has someone – killed a contemporary?'

She shook her head, then nodded, and then said, 'I don't know.'

I'd had enough. If something catastrophic had happened, I needed to know immediately. Before the bloody Time Police came crashing through the door to arrest us all.

I pitched my voice to bring her back. 'Report.'

She pulled herself together. 'The assignment went well. No one knew who we were. We've got masses of good footage.'

'So what went wrong?'

'It was me. I did it.'

'What did you do?'

She clenched her hands tightly in her lap. I'm not actually that terrifying. All right, I'm slightly pregnant, but that doesn't usually reduce people to a state of speechless terror. My husband Leon had actually been quite pleased. And Dr Bairstow had immediately commanded Mrs Partridge to prepare him a briefing on the duties of a godfather. Even I was coming round to the idea.

I said gently, 'Elspeth. You must tell me so I can put it right.'

She took a deep shuddering breath and braced herself. 'I took a gun on the assignment.'

I braced myself because I could see what was coming.

'And ...?'

'And I lost it.'

'Where?'

She couldn't bring herself to say it. 'Not ... here.'

'You took a gun on assignment?'

'Yes.'

'To Ancient Egypt?'

She nodded, miserably.

'But why? You had two security guards.'

Yes, she did. One more than normal, but there were special circumstances attached to Elspeth Grey and Tom Bashford. They'd gone missing in 12th-century Jerusalem and were eventually discovered in Roman Colchester, only minutes before Boudicca's army crashed down upon the town, hell-bent on obliterating everyone and everything within it. Something like that can take some time to recover from.

Bashford had apparently picked up the threads of his old life with

no problems at all, but Grey, who had been the one who battled to keep them both alive while he'd been semi-conscious, had been having problems. It had taken her a year to pluck up the courage to re-enter a pod. I'd selected her for the shipbuilding assignment specifically because it would be quiet and uneventful. And I'd allocated her an extra security guard. To make her feel safe. There were no wars, no plagues, no famines, and no civil unrest at that point in Egypt's history. All they had to do was record the various stages of shipbuilding and anything else they thought might be useful, stay out of trouble, not die, and return to St Mary's. All of which they appeared to have achieved, no problem at all. And now – this.

Keeping my voice steady, I said, 'What did you take?'

She swallowed and whispered, 'A Glock.'

Shit. Glockes don't have a conventional safety catch. They have safe action designed to prevent the weapon accidentally discharging, should it be dropped or banged, but if you pull the trigger, it will fire. Because that's what it's designed to do. And now we had one in Ancient Egypt. Just waiting for someone to pick it up, wave it around, and blow someone's head off.

We're not allowed to kill contemporaries. Think of all the thousands of people who must be descended from one single person living say, three thousand years ago. Now imagine that person never lived long enough to have children. What would happen? Would all those people disappear? Some would never be born. Others would be the product of different parents and all that would work its way down to the present day. Suppose Grey herself suddenly vanished, never having been born. And if she'd never been born then she couldn't go back to Ancient Egypt to leave the gun that was the cause of all the trouble. What would happen then? At the very least the Time Police would come down on us like the proverbial ton of bricks and at the very worst, we'd be looking at the 'P' word.

Paradox.

With two security guards to keep her safe, why on earth would she feel the need to take a weapon? At the very most, historians are allowed a stun gun to defend themselves. Our normal defence strategy is to run like mad away from any trouble. Obviously, it would be nice if we could rely on not getting into trouble in the first place, but we're St Mary's and that's not really a reasonable expectation.

'Elspeth,' I said carefully. 'Tell me about your problem.'

The door opened and Bashford entered.

Without turning my head, I said, 'Go away.'

He closed the door behind him. 'With the greatest respect, Max,

no.'

I'd never actually had someone defy me before. They would stand in front of me and argue themselves to a standstill – that's the definition of an historian – but I don't think I've ever actually had someone look me in the eye and say no.

He said, 'I can explain.'

'No need. Miss Grey is about to do that. Continue, Miss Grey.'

'No, Max ...'

'Be silent, Mr Bashford, or leave the room. Continue, Miss Grey.'

She returned from wherever she had been and focussed on me again.

'I took a gun on the assignment in case ... in case ... *he* was there.'

She meant Clive Ronan. The man who'd snatched them out of Jerusalem and abandoned them in Colchester. Abandoned them to die.

She was continuing, clenching her hands so tightly I could see red crescents where her fingernails were digging into her palms. 'I can't ... I know ... I know it's stupid to expect him to be everywhere I go. I do know that, but I just can't rid myself of the fear that I'll step out of the pod and he'll be there and I'll be whirled off to somewhere and this time ... this time ... there won't be anyone to pull me out and I'll die. And yes, I know you allocated an extra guard. And I know there is no reason to suspect anything like that would ever happen again. I know all that. But I keep thinking, Max ... suppose you hadn't found us. Suppose you hadn't pulled us out in time. Suppose it happens again ...'

Silence fell in the tiny ward. On the other side of the door, I could hear Dr Foster giving Cox a hard time over something or other. She'd be in here in a moment to find out what was going on.

Bashford stirred. 'Max, she's been through enough,' he said, and put a protective hand on her shoulder.

It wasn't needed. I wasn't going to shout at her. Actually, I didn't know what I was going to do. I fell back on more questions.

'So, what happened to the gun?'

'I don't know. I was carrying it in my pack so I could get to it quickly if I needed to. And we stopped for water, and when I looked, it wasn't there.'

'Could it have been stolen?'

'No. Not a chance.'

'Did you take it out and leave it somewhere?'

'No. I think ... I fell ... and my pack came undone. I think it must have been then.'

'Did you go back and look?'

'Yes. Three times.'

‘So Cox and Gallaccio know what happened?’

She nodded.

I had huge sympathy for her, but she’d committed a cardinal sin by taking a gun in the first place and an even bigger cardinal sin by leaving it. My blood ran cold just thinking about a child picking it up, staring down the barrel and wondering what would happen if you pulled this funny bit here ...

‘Did the others know you had this weapon?’

‘No,’ she said, too quickly.

Another cardinal sin. They should have taken it off her.

‘Get them in here, please. Now.’

Bashford left the room.

Tears ran down her cheeks. ‘Max, I’m so sorry.’

‘Good, but don’t cry yet. We’ll think of something.’

She shook her head.

I had several options open to me. The correct procedure would be to go to Dr Bairstow who would probably place the matter in the hands of the Time Police. That was their function, after all. To police the time line, hoovering up anomalies. He would also arrest Miss Grey – he’d have to – and she’d be handed over to the Time Police as well. I really didn’t want that to happen. Their opinion of us is not high and the last thing we needed was to provide proof that we really were the bunch of irresponsible idiots they thought we were. Leaving something behind is unprofessional. Leaving behind a gun capable of killing a contemporary is a major crime. They would probably deal fairly leniently with Grey since she obviously had a problem, but we should have noticed this. I should have noticed it. She was in my department. I knew she’d been struggling, but I hadn’t known it was this bad. Neither had Helen Foster, who had cleared her for duty. And it wasn’t really Elspeth’s fault. She’d done everything she could to avoid going back on the active list and I’d stupidly thought that once she got back on the horse – or into the pod – that everything would be fine. And it hadn’t – been fine, I mean. A lot of this was my fault and I was bugged if I was going to hand over the problem to someone else without having a good go at fixing it first.

Bashford came back with a very sheepish looking Cox and Gallaccio.

‘We’re going to fix this,’ I said. ‘Before Dr Bairstow or the Time Police or Major Guthrie have even the slightest idea there’s been a problem.’

This was an effective threat. Dangling their boss, Ian Guthrie, in front of them focussed their minds wonderfully. They would give a great deal for him not to know how badly things had gone wrong on this assignment.

I got up and opened the door. Dr Foster was heading towards me.
'What's going on in there?'

'How plausible do you want your deniability to be?'

'Oh for God's sake, Max.'

'Give me an hour or so, and then you need to have a quiet talk with Grey.'

She sighed. 'One hour. No longer.'

An hour was all I needed.

Still unsure what I was going to say, I sat down again with Elspeth, but my fears were unfounded.

'I know, Max. You don't have to say anything. I'll write out my notice and it'll be on Dr Bairstow's desk the first morning after the Christmas holiday.'

I sighed but she was right. She'd had a year to resume her old life and it was very obvious that she didn't wish to do so.

'Max, I'm so sorry – whatever you're going to do, I'm sure I shouldn't let you do it. Maybe I should confess to Dr Bairstow now and take my medicine.'

She was underestimating the seriousness of the matter. A loaded gun adrift in Ancient Egypt was far more than a disciplinary problem but there was no point in making things worse for her. Not at the moment, anyway. I tried for optimism.

'It needn't come to that. I'm going to take Markham, have a poke around, and see what we can find. Who knows – we might be able to pick it straight up and be back here before you've even had time to turn around – and if – when – we find it, Markham will have it back in the Armoury before anyone even knows it was missing.'

'Ian won't be happy.'

No, he wouldn't. As someone with a close personal interest in Miss Grey, he would be unhappy she hadn't confided in him. As Head of the Security Section, he would be incandescent with rage if he ever found out what she'd done.

'We'll sort that out later as well,' I said, ignoring all these potential disasters piling up on the horizon like oncoming storm clouds. 'You were in Pod Five?'

She nodded.

'Which you have, of course, thoroughly searched from top to bottom?'

'Four times.'

I thought. 'Do you have any idea when you could possibly have lost it?'

'There was a day – at the launching – when I dropped my pack and it fell open, but I'm not stupid, Max. I checked very, very thoroughly,

and so did Cox who was with me at the time. It wasn't there.'

'Did you ever leave the pod at night?'

She just looked at me. Yes all right – a stupid question. If she'd been terrified of Clive Ronan turning up during the day then she was hardly likely to leave the safety of the pod to blunder around in the dark.

I got up.

'OK, Dr Foster will be in to see you in a moment. Listen to what she has to say, keep your mouth shut to everyone else, and leave everything to me.'

I went to find Markham and we stood in an empty training room where no one could see us or hear us and had a long talk.

When we'd hammered out the details, he said, 'What about Peterson?'

'What about him?'

'Isn't this our Christmas tradition? We steal a pod – usually Chief Farrell's – make an illegal jump to put something right and everything ends happily. So far, we're well on track, but there's always the three of us. You, me, and Peterson.'

I sighed. 'We really shouldn't involve him. He's going to be Deputy Director. And he's not fit enough yet.'

Peterson had sustained a terrible wound in 15th-century France. His arm was healed and he'd regained some movement – enough to come third in the Security Section's Annual All Comers One-Handed Bra Unfastening Competition (or SSAACOHBU for short), but if things went south, he might not be able to defend himself. I saw the scene again – Peterson sprawled on the floor, soaked in blood, dying under my hands ...

Markham said gently, 'Surely it's his decision to make, Max.'

'It's not one we should ask him to make. We'd be putting him in a difficult position.'

He shrugged. 'It's just you and me, then.'

'Just you and me. Do you know what you have to do?'

He nodded.

'Right, we'll meet in the paint store in ... thirty minutes.'

I raced around the building like a madwoman because I didn't have time to be discreet. I strode into Wardrobe and requisitioned what we needed. Confidence is the key. I'm the Chief Operations Officer and head of the History Department. If I can't march around helping myself to all the equipment needed for an illegal jump to save a colleague, preserve the reputation of St Mary's, and protect the timeline, then who can?

I deposited everything at the back of the paint store, safely concealed behind the tins of Sunshine Yellow, and went off to see what had happened to Markham. I found him in what the Security Section likes to refer to as their nerve centre, which was a fancy name for a small, windowless room with a kettle, seven mugs, two tins of biscuits, a calendar picturing two fluffy kittens sitting in a slipper, and the petty cash box lying open on a shelf and bulging with IOUs. Half a dozen monitors showed various views from around the building. A giant fuse box with a zigzag lightning bolt painted across it was attached to the wall.

Markham was festooning strings of fairy lights around the security monitors. A cat's cradle of wires connected them to each other and the fuse box.

I opened my mouth to demand what the hell he thought he was playing at and then remembered to whom I was talking.

'Pretty,' I said.

'You don't know the half of it,' he said. 'When this is over I'm going to rig them to flash on and off in time to "White Christmas". Now stand in the middle of the room and, for God's sake, don't touch anything metal. In fact, put your hands in your pockets.'

'Why?'

He threw a switch. There was a white flash, followed by a bang, followed by the smell of burnt fish. I just had time to register that all the monitors had faded to black with only a little white dot in the centre, when all the lights went out. Then the fire alarms went off.

Hat-trick.

'Deary, deary me,' he said, in a voice of immense satisfaction. 'I wonder how that could have happened.'

In the distance, I could hear my husband Leon, the unit's Chief Technical Officer, demanding to know which idiot was responsible for ... the last part of the sentence was lost as a door closed somewhere.

'How long have we got?'

'Well, speaking from personal experience, evacuating St Mary's is a bit like herding cats. No one will be able to find Professor Rapson. Mrs Mack won't move without Vortigern.' (Vortigern is her beloved kitchen cat.) 'And he won't move at all if he can help it. No one will be able to remember where the assembly point is. Someone will fall into the lake. All the historians will just stand around looking stupid and refusing to budge because it's snowing out there and they don't want to get their precious selves cold and wet. A good hour, I reckon.'

'Brilliant,' I said in awe. 'Absolutely bloody brilliant.'

'Yeah,' he said modestly. 'Aren't I?'

‘On this occasion – yes.’

He produced a torch and we slipped out of the door.

It was chaos out there. It’s bedlam at St Mary’s when the lights are on. It’s a hundred times worse when the lights are out.

All around us was a maelstrom of raised voices shouting conflicting instructions, supernova-bright torches blinding everyone they shone on, dreadful language, and the odd scream as someone fell over something. We crept cautiously along the corridors, but quite honestly, they wouldn’t have noticed if Napoleon’s army had swung through on their way to Moscow, singing the 1812 Overture scored for full chorus, twenty-one cannons, and a tambourine.

We battled our way through the crowds. ‘Like salmon swimming upstream,’ said Markham at one point, eventually arriving at the paint store. We oozed inside and closed the door, shutting out the noise behind us. In the sudden silence, I heaved a sigh of relief. Difficult part over with.

No it wasn’t. Peterson was waiting for us.

We stopped dead and everyone looked at everyone else.

When it became apparent he wasn’t going to speak, I said, ‘How on earth did you know?’

He raised his eyebrows at me, his expression enigmatic. At that moment, he looked very like Dr Bairstow. He was going to make a wonderful Deputy Director.

‘Is that a serious question? It’s Christmas. The two of you are whispering in corners looking mysterious. Grey’s in tears. Then, mysteriously, the lights go out. Why didn’t you just make a public announcement?’

Markham shuffled his feet and muttered something.

I sighed. ‘Does everyone know?’

‘If you mean Chief Farrell and Major Guthrie – Leon’s racing around trying to get the lights on and the fire alarms off, and Guthrie’s gearing up for the invasion he’s convinced is imminent. Of course, neither of them is going to be pleased when they discover the true cause of the emergency.’

‘I may have to live abroad for a while,’ said Markham gloomily.

‘You should live so long. So, what’s this all about?’

I was uneasy for him. ‘You oughtn’t to be involved.’

‘Tell me or I grass the pair of you up to Dr Bairstow right now.’

‘You tell him,’ I said to Markham, and pushed my way past them to retrieve our equipment and load up the pod.

Pods are our centre of operations. We use them to jump back to whichever time period we’ve been assigned. We live in them and work in them. Occasionally, we die in them. They’re small, cramped, and smelly, and that’s even before you add a couple of historians to

the mix. Leon's pod is a single-seater, so this one was even smaller and more cramped than usual. I activated the screen and watched the two of them indulge in a heated discussion while I laid in the coordinates.

When I emerged, task done, Markham was just finishing. 'And let's face it, it wouldn't be Christmas if we weren't stealing Chief Farrell's pod and breaking all the rules for a good cause.'

'Once. We did that once.'

'All traditions have to start somewhere.'

Peterson sighed. 'So how is this going to work, then? Don't tell me you haven't got a plan?'

'We jump to the original coordinates. Very carefully ensuring we are not seen by Bashford and his gang, we shadow them. We follow their every move. With luck, we can identify the exact moment the gun goes missing. As soon as they're clear, we swoop in, grab the bloody thing, and jump back to St Mary's. Markham will get it back to the Armoury and no one ever knows a thing about it.'

There was a brief silence as we contemplated all the many things that could go wrong with this simple plan.

'If they catch sight of us ...' said Peterson doubtfully.

'They won't,' I said with a confidence worthy of a much better scheme.

Peterson shook his head. 'You'll go too far one day, Max.'

'Very likely, but not today. Shall we go?'

That's the thing about time travel – or investigating major historical events in contemporary time, of course – once we were actually in Ancient Egypt, we were off the clock. We could take as long as we liked to find this bloody gun and still get back less than an hour after we jumped. We climbed into the pod.

'There are only rations for about a week,' announced Peterson, rummaging through the lockers. 'If we haven't found it by then we might have a problem.'

'We'd have less of a problem if you stayed behind,' I said, pointedly.

'And more food, too,' added Markham.

'Drag your mind away from your stomach, will you?' said Peterson.

'Hey, I'm not the one jeopardising the entire mission with my unwanted presence,' said Markham.

'Shut up, the pair of you,' I said in my newly acquired role of mission facilitator and peacemaker. 'Let's get out of here before anyone comes looking for us.'

There was the usual quarrel about who was to drive. Peterson lost because he can't help bouncing his pod whenever and wherever he lands. We've never dared take him to Constantinople in case he

skims, pebble-like, across the Bosphorus and we end up in the wrong continent. I left Markham to make this telling argument while I made myself comfortable and started flicking switches. Peterson's indignant response that, since we weren't actually going to Constantinople it hardly mattered, was ignored.

'Computer, initiate jump.'

'Jump initiated.'

The world went white.

And here I was again. Ancient Egypt. I'd been here before. Several times, actually. If I had it right, we'd arrived during the reign of Hatshepsut, when Egypt was at the height of her power. One of this female Pharaoh's many achievements was her trading expedition to the legendary land of Punt in the ninth year of her reign. She built five ships – quite an achievement in a land where wood was scarce – and this was what Bashford's team were here to check out.

Bashford's pod, Number Five, should be arriving any moment now. We'd aimed to arrive just before them because we couldn't afford to miss a second.

'There,' said Peterson, leaning over my shoulder as they materialised. 'On the other side of that palm grove. Don't let them see us.'

This was the real reason we'd brought Leon's pod. It has a camouflage device. And no – it's not cloaking. It's camouflage. Apparently, there's a difference. Leon will be happy to explain it to you, although that will be a week of your life you'll never get back again. I operated the system and, to all intents and purposes, we were invisible. We just had to hope a camel didn't walk into us.

I watched the screen, waiting for Bashford's team to emerge, while Markham and Peterson quarrelled over the gear I'd blagged from Wardrobe. Since I hadn't expected Peterson to join our happy band, unless one of them was prepared to wear a dress, it was obvious there wasn't enough to cover the pair of them adequately. Peterson solved the problem by pulling rank, leaving a complaining Markham to do something ingenious with an old bed sheet he found in a locker.

'There,' he said, securing himself firmly with a length of material he was using as a belt. 'What do you think?'

Markham looks unkempt and dishevelled in any century. There are people in the world who can make even the richest and most gorgeous clothes look scruffy and, if they had a professional organisation to represent them, Markham would be Chairman. And probably Secretary and Treasurer as well.

We contemplated him.

'You look like a girl,' said Peterson.

‘And not for the first time,’ I told him.

‘I think he looks adorable,’ said Peterson.

‘I think I look like someone wearing a bed sheet.’

‘Perhaps we could tell people he’s on some sort of institutional day-release scheme,’ I said doubtfully.

‘We’ll tell people he’s our slave,’ said Peterson.

‘Why am I always the slave?’

‘Demarcation. We’re historians. You’re not. It’s not rocket science.’

‘They’ll be out in a minute,’ I said, endeavouring to get things back on track. ‘We should get a move on. Keep an eye on things. I’ll join you in a minute.’

I scrambled into the long linen tunic-dress I’d brought with me. It was a little tight because of my expanding waistline, but my waistline is always expanding. It seems to have been a one-way process throughout my life and pregnancy wasn’t helping. I tied up my hair, plonked the coarse black wig on top, and sighed. I was going to be very hot.

I had, however, brought a linen parasol and my make-up bag. Two minutes in front of a mirror with eye shadow and black eyeliner and I looked moderately respectable. As did Peterson. Markham looked like a grumpy transvestite who had escaped from a Care in the Community Programme. With mascara.

‘Just stay at the back,’ advised Peterson.

‘Here they come,’ I said.

I might as well say now that their behaviour during this assignment was impeccable. Bashford – when not concussed – was an excellent historian, and his team, even Grey, was unobtrusive and professional. They walked as a quiet group, heads down, discreet.

They had a strict walking order. Bashford at the front, then Gallaccio, then Grey, and Cox brought up the rear. The men had wicker baskets heaved over their shoulders and Grey carried a soft, knotted pack. It had straps but she wouldn’t wear it on her back, insisting on carrying it in her arms. So that she could get to the gun quickly, as I now realised, because hindsight is so marvellous and we all have it in spades.

They walked well-trodden paths, but even I couldn’t have got lost here. All paths led to the bustling boatyard.

I know there are still places in the present world where boats are made by hand – I’ve seen one or two as a tourist – but this was amazing.

The boatyard was vast. All around us, I could see craft of every description in varying degrees of completion. Reed rafts for hunting game birds in the marshes; papyrus boats, commissioned by the

Pharaoh or her priests for ceremonial purposes; and big wooden barges for military use or for transporting cargo. Some were already in the water. Some had been hauled onto dry land and propped upright on wooden spars, presumably for repair.

Great wooden hulls were silhouetted against the sky. The sound of hammering and sawing filled the air. I could smell the river, hot mud, new wood, and burning tar.

Stocky men, burned dark by the sun and wearing loincloths or short tunics swarmed everywhere, shouting to each other. Everyone was busy and full of purpose. There were no women anywhere. Any food and water was brought by young boys. I made sure to stay well back.

Surrounding the boatyard were a number of workshops housing carpenters, rope makers, caulkers, and other allied trades. Canvas awnings slung between them provided much-needed shade in which to work.

Because it was hot. It was very, very hot. As hot as hell. Dust rose everywhere in great clouds, sticking to my sweaty skin. It was in my hair, my eyes, even my mouth. I could feel it under my clothing. Within minutes, we were all covered in a film of gritty, reddish dust, just like everyone else, but the upside was that now we fitted right in. If Bashford and the others turned around at this very moment, they were unlikely to recognise us.

Sadly, this worked both ways. We had the same problem recognising them. In fact, if they hadn't had Grey with them, we might not have been able to pick them out at all. On the other hand, of course, if they hadn't had Grey with them then we wouldn't be here.

They settled themselves unobtrusively, sharing the shade of an acacia tree with several dogs who refused to budge. The best we could get was a clump of thorny bushes some way back behind a sort of lean-to where they appeared to be boiling papyrus. Probably to make caulk. That's the material with which they waterproof their boats. The demand seemed insatiable. Piles of the harvested papyrus lay around and men arrived with fresh supplies almost hourly.

Huge vats of the stuff were being heated over open fires and I could see the heat haze rippling above each cauldron, because, of course, we weren't hot enough, were we? The men working here were practically naked and I didn't blame them in the slightest. Just watching them made my hair prickle and sweat run down my back. My tunic was drenched and limp.

Back at St Mary's, they'd be having a pre-Christmas snowball fight in which many old scores would be settled by a handful of cold wet snow down the back of your neck. I'd give anything for a handful of

cold wet snow down the back of my neck.

I've no idea what type of straggly bush was providing our only patch of shade – this is what happens when you're not properly prepped – but they were apparently made of razor blades. We struggled to the centre of the thicket, made ourselves as comfortable as possible, and watched.

And watched.

We never took our eyes off them and I honestly couldn't see how she'd ever managed to lose the bloody thing. Even when working, she usually kept one hand on her pack and she certainly never let it out of her reach. I noticed too that Bashford was never very far away from her. In fact, deliberately or otherwise, she was never left alone. Even from this distance, I could see how nervous she was, jumping at every sound. Continually alert for the unexpected. It was only this time last year that we were yanking her out of Colchester. I sighed. This was all my fault. I should never have assigned her.

When Bashford's team returned to their pod, we returned to ours, since Grey had never left it at night. A shower would have been wonderful but not having been prepped to go out, the tanks weren't full and we had to conserve water. We did briefly discuss a quick dip in the Nile but I was once chased by a herd (or whatever the collective noun is) of Nile crocodiles; Leon and I barely escaped, and that sort of experience does tend to discourage the use of the Nile for casual bathing and recreational purposes. So we shook out our clothes, washed carefully, and conserved water.

Days passed. Our supplies grew low and I began to worry. Every morning, just before dawn, Bashford's team left their pod. We followed on as closely as we dared. Not too close, but not too far behind either. Following in their footsteps, eyes on the ground, always looking for that bloody gun.

They would settle themselves in for a long day's observing and we observed the observers. After they departed, one of us would nip over and give the area the once over in case she'd dropped it there. She never had.

As far as we could see, they were making general observations, but concentrating mainly on a ninety-foot long transportation barge, which was taking shape in front of our eyes. Four others lay alongside. Men swarmed all over them, up and down wooden ladders. Long ago, Herodotus had described how Egyptian boats were built, using methods that, with typical Egyptian resistance to change, had remained virtually unaltered over the centuries. Just wooden planking, cut to a precise shape that would fit tightly together in a brick pattern.

'Not a nail in sight,' said Peterson admiringly.

Time passed slowly. It does in Egypt. I now knew more about Egyptian shipbuilding than was good for me. We couldn't even fall back on that standard English conversational device, the weather, because once we'd agreed it was hot, that was pretty well it. There were flies everywhere, most of whom fell in love with Markham. At one point, nearly every insect in the country seemed to regard him as a desirable place to take up residence, or lay their eggs and bring up their family, and he was covered in lumps, bumps, bites, and stings, and had developed a small but interesting rash on his elbow.

'Not a clue,' said Peterson, peering at it. 'Does it hurt?'

'Like buggery.'

'Well, don't scratch it.'

'Is that it? You're both field medics and the best you can come up with is "Don't scratch it?"'

'We could amputate your arm if you like,' I offered, out of the goodness of my heart. 'That would certainly enable us to showcase our medical skills.'

Peterson nodded enthusiastically.

Markham protectively clutched his diseased arm and glared at us.

'You know what,' said Peterson, settling back as comfortably as he could, 'one day we'll have a normal Christmas. We'll spend the run up decorating St Mary's. There will be streamers and tinsel and a tree and, if I can manoeuvre Helen into the right position *vis-à-vis* the mistletoe, some serious snogging. There will be carols and eggnog and silly games. We'll listen to the King's Speech. We'll all consume a year's worth of calories in one meal and then, when she's too stuffed to put up any sort of resistance, I'll ask Helen a very important question. It will be a proper Christmas.'

He sat, staring happily into his future. Markham and I eyed each other and said nothing.

To pass the time, we discussed names for the baby. Agamemnon got the most votes, followed by Iphigenia.

To assist him in his ongoing struggle against the insect world, we pumped Markham full of everything we could find in the med kit and each morning, at his request, I sprayed him thoroughly with a can of some sort of repellent he said was at the back of one of the lockers and which seemed to be doing the job, even if he did smell of rancid grease afterwards.

'We've been here nearly a week,' said Markham one day, wiping sweat off his face. 'Suppose we don't ever find it? Would it be safe to assume that if we can't find it – and we've been looking hard – then no one else will either? That it's been buried forever or at the bottom of an irrigation ditch or something?'

‘Not with our luck,’ said Peterson. ‘I wish they’d hurry up and launch this bloody ship. We’re running short of food and water.’

He was right on both counts. With our luck, the gun would be picked up by some kid who, in the sort of freakish set of circumstances with which St Mary’s is so familiar, would manage to blow Hatshepsut’s head off and change History for all time. And our supplies were dwindling fast.

I was beginning to lose my optimism. We huddled together, following our tiny patch of shade as best we could, dogging the other team’s every step, and there was no sign anywhere of that bloody gun. For two pins, I’d have stormed across, grabbed the thing from her pack, and jumped back to St Mary’s as quickly as possible, but I couldn’t. She never let it out of her reach.

We were hot, hungry, thirsty, sunburned, stung, and going nowhere. The barge, which appeared to be the focus of their observations, was nearing completion. They would pack up and jump back and we’d have no choice other than to follow them. Then I’d have to go and have a very difficult conversation with Dr Bairstow.

For the first time, I began to wonder whether I should have gone straight to the Time Police and left them to sort it out. Every day we were here we risked being discovered, and that would be disastrous because it would influence events that had already happened. Doubt gnawed at me and there were several occasions when I hovered on the brink of pulling us out and heading home.

‘No,’ said Markham, reading my mind. ‘Give it a little while longer.’

I looked at our sunburned selves. ‘I don’t know how I’m going to explain this away. We’re going to be in such trouble.’

‘I wouldn’t worry too much,’ he said, examining his rash again which had spread to his other elbow via his knees. ‘Everyone knows you can talk people into pulling the most outrageous stunts that seem perfectly logical at the time, and we always seem to get back more or less safely. It’s me that has to explain to Major Guthrie just how I managed to get trampled by a war elephant/covered in boiling oil/locked in the oubliette/stung by the scorpion and so on. He’s never impressed by any of it and somehow the mad redhead always gets off scot-free and everything turns out to be my fault.’

‘True,’ I said, feeling more cheerful.

On the sixth day, we wearily heaved ourselves out of the pod and trudged off to the boatyard, carefully following in Bashford’s footsteps. Peterson checked the left-hand side of the path, Markham the right and I came along behind, acting as sweeper.

So far, everything as usual. On this day, however, we would have some excitement. Today was the day the ship would be launched. It

wasn't completed yet, but there would be a small ceremony as it was dragged down to the water. We assumed they had to float it now before it became too big and heavy to be moved.

'A bit like you in a few months, Max,' said Markham to me.

I suppose that for a race which casually dots massive pyramids willy-nilly around the landscape, launching a boat, however large, presents no problems at all.

There was the obligatory shouting, of course, even when addressing the man only two feet away, because if you don't shout, how will people know how important you are?

Thick, chocolate-coloured ropes were attached in what was almost a cat's cradle. The boat had a mast but no rigging or any of the horizontal bits – whatever they're called. There were no quarter rudders yet – that's the two big oars at the back. Look, I'm not a sailor – OK? The big bit of wood, the sternpost, which helped compress the planking and keep it watertight, was carved in the image of a huge lotus. The work was obviously a labour of love – it was beautiful. The lotus is a sacred symbol in Egypt.

Lines of men arrived, apparently from nowhere, their bodies already glistening with sweat. Someone somewhere had a drum. Someone always has a drum. They lined up in their teams, complete with overseer, planted their feet, spat on their hands, and took up the slack.

The drumbeat began, slow and rhythmical. The lines of men threw themselves into a near horizontal position and heaved.

'Interesting,' said Peterson. 'They pull backwards – like a tug of war team.'

They were just like a tug of war team. Shifting their weight from foot to foot, barely moving an inch at a time, grunting with the effort, they began to build up a momentum. The drum banged on, providing the rhythm. Crowds of people, men, women, and children cheered with enthusiasm and threw flowers. This was obviously a great day for those who had built her. The day she went down to the water. I wondered what her name was. There would be five of these beautiful boats making that epic voyage to the fabulous land of Punt, and all their names are lost in the mists of History.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the boat began to move down the slipway. I say slipway, but it was just a gentle slope down to the water, baked hard as concrete by sun and regular use. Two men ran down each side, knocking away the wooden props.

We stood up for a better view. No one was bothering to look at us, least of all Bashford and his crew. Even Grey was completely involved in what was happening, her pack clutched tightly to her

chest.

To our left, a group of priests began to chant, raising their hands skywards, possibly invoking the blessing of the great god Re as he travelled across the heavens in his solar boat. Or if not his blessing then those of whichever deities considered themselves responsible for ships and sailors in this god-laden country.

As the boat slid majestically past them, their chanting rose to a crescendo and acolytes began flicking what I suspected was blood along the hull. There's always blood at a ship launch. I read somewhere that the Norsemen launched their boats over living sacrifices, to ensure the keel was well and truly saturated, because that always brought good fortune. Although not to the sacrifices, of course.

Small boys ran up and down the lines of toiling men, throwing buckets of water over them before anyone expired in the heat.

The noise was enormous. In addition to the drum, a small group of musicians had turned up with the priests. A pipe wailed mournfully, although this was probably a happy song. It's quite hard to tell sometimes. Cymbals clashed. Even the dogs woke up and ran around barking hysterically and getting in everyone's way.

'This is the way to launch a ship,' shouted Markham, peering red-eyed at the scene.

'It's still done more or less this way,' I said. 'They just use champagne and a brass band these days. Not half so much fun, though.'

'Yes,' said Peterson thoughtfully. 'Sadly, I have to say I can't see Princess Alice flinging a bucket of blood at a ship as it slides past. Which is a shame, really. She'd enjoy it.'

Now, at a command from somewhere, a number of men at the front relinquished their ropes, trotted around to the back, and began to push. The boat picked up speed, reaching the point where it would be unstoppable. Anxious mothers called for their children. The dogs got out of the way. The long lines of men, beautifully coordinated, began to peel away. She was moving by herself now, eager to reach the water. Men were cheering and urging her on. This was obviously a good sign.

And before anyone asks, I hadn't forgotten about Grey. She still stood, eyes fixed on the launching, still holding on to her pack for dear life.

Ten feet to go.

Then six.

Then three.

She was there, gliding smoothly into the water. Pushing a bow wave before her. The lines at the back tightened. In a torrent of white

water, she jerked to a halt, swaying (or whatever the nautical term is) from side to side. With a final triumphant shout, men took the strain, feet skidding in the dust. Someone lobbed a couple of sea anchors over the side and there she was. Unfinished, lacking a complete mast, sail, or oars, but beautiful nevertheless. And alive. This ship was a living thing. I can understand now why shipbuilders and sailors always refer to boats as she and endow them with living characteristics. I was so glad I'd had the opportunity to see this.

The ship's crew were unhitching the ropes and tossing them into the water, where they were pulled in, coiled, and stowed away.

The crowd broke ranks, running to the water's edge in excitement. Everyone was eager to see the new ship.

And then it happened. I was watching and I saw exactly what happened to the gun.

As you can imagine, there were crowds of excited kids running everywhere. Most of them were stark naked, covered in God knows what, with crusty nostrils, weeping eyes, and completely bald apart from their side knots. They made Markham look spotless and those are two words I never thought I'd get to use in the same sentence.

A group of shrieking youngsters, all tangled up with yelping dogs, raced down to the water's edge for a better view, and ran straight into Bashford's team. There was no harm done, but Grey was knocked down. She staggered, fell, and dropped her pack, which hit the ground and fell open, spilling its contents everywhere.

I took two paces to the left for a better view.

The kids raced on regardless, kicking her stuff in all directions and I saw it. I saw the gun hit the ground and spin sideways. A laughing little boy, completely unaware of what he was doing, accidentally kicked it under a vat of caulk.

No one noticed except me.

Grey was on her knees, scrabbling her stuff together and ramming it back into her pack. Bashford and Gallaccio were still watching the boat. Cox stood guard over her as she knotted her pack together again and scrambled to her feet.

I saw him say something to her, presumably asking if she had everything. I saw her look around. They both did. They both checked the area very, very thoroughly. It wasn't their fault the gun was about ten feet away under a cauldron of cold pitch. And that was about the only thing we could be grateful for. That today the fire had been extinguished and the ashes were cold.

Taking her arm, he helped her to run after the others at the shoreline.

I stood undecided. Go after it now and risk the other team turning

around and seeing us? Or wait for them to move off and risk losing it again?

I hesitated and that hesitation was fatal. Even as I stood and stared, a tiny boy darted forwards, scooped up the gun, turned it over in his grubby paws, and before I could get to him, he ran off.

‘Bollocks! Come on.’

We set off after him. Very carefully, because there is never a time period when chasing after a kid is a good idea. The chances were that almost everyone in this boatyard was a relation of some kind or other. My plans for Christmas did not include being impaled.

He raced around the sail-makers’ workshop and along the riverbank.

We trotted after him, doing our best to look inconspicuous.

He stopped after a while, looked around, and crouched in the dust to examine his prize.

Peterson pushed past me and sprinted. Never mind what anyone thought – if he pulled the trigger then we really would be in the shit. Even more deeply than usual.

Peterson was nearly there. A few more yards, grab the gun, ignore the inevitable protests and possible tears, then it was everyone back to the pod, jump back to St Mary’s, replace the gun, smile at everyone, and deny everything. We could do this.

And then another boy burst out of a reed bed. Older and bigger, he’d lost his side knot, so he wasn’t a child any longer. Looking back, he might have been an older brother, and in the manner of older brothers everywhere, he clumped the smaller kid round the side of the head, relieved him of his treasure, and was away off down the path before anyone else had quite worked out what was happening.

I made a mental note to remember how inconveniently fast children could move.

Markham and I caught up and stared after the vanishing figure.

‘Go,’ I said. ‘Both of you. I’ll catch up. Now. Go now.’

They didn’t argue. A second later, the kid and I were alone. He knuckled his eyes and peered up at me, tears leaving tracks through the dirt on his face. I stared down at him. He looked like a giant germ. I should do something. I was going to be a mother. I should get some practice. Gingerly, I patted his head. Making a mental note that no kid of mine would ever be that sticky, I wiped my hand on my tunic and set off after my boys.

I trotted around a stand of corn and nearly fell over Markham, sprawled across the path.

‘What are you doing? Are you hurt?’

‘No,’ he said, primly rearranging his bed sheet for decency and looking sheepish. ‘I ... just ... fell over.’

‘You tripped?’

‘Don’t think so. I just ... lost my balance and toppled over.’ He reached up a hand and I hauled him to his feet.

I peered at him as he swayed gently, squinting at me through swollen eyes.

‘Are you sure you’re OK? I think you might have been stung by something.’

‘I’ve been stung by bloody everything. This repellent you’ve been spraying’s rubbish and the fumes are making me feel sick,’ he said.

‘How long have you been feeling like this?’

‘I’ve felt a bit iffy for a day or so. It’s worse today. Come on.’

We set off after Peterson, who was crouched behind a fig tree, peering at a group of children of indeterminate age.

‘What’s going on?’

‘He’s met some friends.’

‘Bollocks.’

‘Exactly.’

‘How many?’

‘Too many for us to take on. Hang on – he’s on the move again.’

He was indeed, heading towards the town. Head down, he trotted purposefully along the track until the track became a path and then a small road.

I groaned in frustration. There were far too many people around for us to attempt a little gentle highway robbery. I had a horrible feeling our best chance had been and gone and we’d blown it.

Behind me, Markham was throwing up.

I turned. ‘I really think you should go back to the pod.’

‘I’m fine,’ he said, wiping his chin. ‘Everyone’s sick when they go to Egypt. It’s part of the tourist tradition. See the pyramids. Get ripped off in the markets. Throw up your breakfast.’

He looked terrible. All right, the insect stings were clearing up but his rash was much worse. His eyes were swollen and red. His nose was running faster than an historian late for her tea break, and he was swaying gracefully in the breeze.

This assignment was just going from bad to worse. Not only had we significantly failed to retrieve the gun, but Markham had obviously contracted something dreadful and was dying by inches in front of my eyes.

I turned to Peterson, meaning to call the whole thing off there and then. We’d done our best but we’d just made things worse. Time to admit defeat, return home, and face the music.

‘No,’ croaked Markham, leaning against a convenient bit of tree trunk. ‘He’s gone to sell it on, I bet you. And once that happens we’ve lost it forever. We have to move now or we’re sunk. Come on.’

Moving like something from one of those zombie movies, he staggered off down the road. Peterson and I looked helplessly at each other and then followed.

This wasn't a major city. This was barely a settlement. There certainly weren't any walls. Or guards. But there was a market. Quite a large market actually. Mostly livestock, but there were a few stalls off to one side.

We fought our way through belligerent goats, greasy sheep that left a long smear of grubby lanolin down my dress, and stropy donkeys. We avoided the camels, tied up in the shade. Enough people had spat at us in our time. Besides, we had Markham with us and his relations with the animal kingdom are never cordial. My own theory is that somewhere, back in the mists of time, he and an unknown animal had an unfortunate experience which has somehow survived in the animal kingdom's race memory and the instruction has gone out that he's to be attacked at every opportunity. Over the years, he's been chased, bitten, kicked, trampled, half-eaten, and generally terrorised, so now he tends to give all wildlife a wide berth. Although looking at the state of him now, not wide enough.

We fought our way through the crowds, never taking our eyes off the boy. Fortunately for us, he was wearing a scrappy tunic of a particularly disgusting ochre colour. I guessed it had once been white but been badly stained and someone, probably his mum, had attempted to dye it to cover the damage. She'd have done better to have left the stain. The poor kid looked like the unpleasant aftermath of a bout of amoebic dysentery. Anyway, bad choice of wardrobe or not, he was easy to track. We drew closer and closer until we were right behind him.

He knew exactly where he was going. He headed straight for one particular stall near the end.

No. No, no, no. This was not good. Once money changed hands, the gun would acquire value and be so much more difficult to retrieve. To say nothing of being bought by someone else. I cursed. We should have overpowered him when we could and taken our chances.

No money changed hands. The stallholder acquired the gun from the boy in exactly the same manner as he had acquired it from his younger brother. He clumped him round the side of the head and took it.

The lad said something rude, got a clip around the other ear, melted back into the crowd, and was gone.

'Now,' I said.

'But there are people everywhere.'

'There's never going to be a right moment. Let's get out there and make our own opportunities.'

We strolled casually towards the stall. Peterson in the lead. Me, one pace behind and (I hoped) the epitome of matronly respectability with my parasol, and Markham, looking every inch the abused and diseased slave brought along to carry the shopping.

The place was a real dump. This was not a bright, shining Egyptian metropolis with stele and monuments to the gods, beautiful temples, and imposing public buildings. This place was full of mud-brick houses, many of them reverting to their natural state; a public well surrounded by gossiping women; the ever-present clouds of dust; a very funny smell; and more goats than were attractive – unless you were another goat, of course. The streets were narrow, unpaved, and deep in rubbish. The smell was robust and livestock based, with top notes of spices, cooking, and people. If this settlement had grown up to service the boatyard then it was failing. The boatyard was thriving – this place was not.

Deprived of the cooling breezes from the river, the narrow streets were hot and airless. Flies buzzed everywhere. I could feel them crawling on my arms and shoulders. They kept settling in my eyes, which was incredibly irritating. And painful. I could see how infection spread so easily here.

Speaking of which, I turned to check out Markham who gave me a feeble grin and a wave. He looked dreadful. I decided if we hadn't retrieved the bloody gun in the next thirty minutes then we were out of here. He needed medical treatment.

Peterson had paused at the stall. Assuming his 'Let's hope I don't catch anything unpleasant' expression, he began to rummage through the bric-a-brac on the stall, ignoring the gun displayed on an old wooden tray, half concealed under a string of badly matched amber beads and worth more than everything on the stall put together, and probably even the stallholder himself.

I leaned forwards and fingered the shabby jewellery. No hurry. No rush. We were just a couple of browsing shoppers who might possibly buy something today ...

Peterson picked up the gun by the barrel and turned it over curiously. He did it beautifully. He passed it to me. I took it, carefully held it upside down, and said, 'Laugh.'

We all laughed merrily at the funny metal object with no clearly discernible function.

I itched to remove the clip and break it open, but the last thing we needed was anyone seeing how it worked.

Peterson took it back off me, held it up, and made a gesture to the stallholder. How much?

He shrugged. I suspected he had no idea how much to ask. He'd never seen anything like it before. He'd assessed us, our clothing, our

clearly sub-standard slave and was waiting to see how much we would offer.

I briefly considered just grabbing the bloody thing and running away. If the pod was closer then we might have got away with it. But not today. The market was crowded and, with our luck, they would all be his friends and relations. Just for once, we needed to be legitimate.

While I was dithering, the stallholder suddenly grabbed it back off Peterson and embarked on his sales pitch. Holding it by the barrel, he began to bang the handle on the table. I suspected he was demonstrating its nut-cracking capabilities.

We all winced and stepped back. This was not a weapon ever designed for bludgeoning nuts. Of course, he was the one in the most danger. I imagined the scene, heard the bang, saw him drop to the ground, blood pooling around him ... Or suppose the bullet ricocheted into the crowds of people around us ...

We had to do something. I bet he had friends all around the place. Sooner or later, someone would show up and pretend to be interested. That might attract the attention of other bona fide buyers. A bidding war. Anything to force the price up. We had to act now.

I smiled at Peterson and indicated, through the medium of mime, that I just had to have it. My life would be ruined if I didn't.

Now we came to the sticking point because none of us had any money. Or anything of value. Even our slave was the equivalent of an old banger that had had its clock wound back twice. Now what did we do?

As it turned out, we didn't have to do anything. He'd seen my wedding ring.

We're not actually allowed to wear jewellery on assignment. I shouldn't be wearing it now, but in the rush to get away, I'd forgotten to take it off. In gold-rich Egypt it couldn't be worth that much but he'd seen it, assessed its worth and small though it might be, it was definitely worth more than this bizarre metal object, purpose unknown, that probably wasn't very good at crushing nuts.

We're not allowed to leave anything behind, although in the scheme of things, a small golden ring was considerably less hazardous than a 9 mm Glock. I was prepared to accept the lesser of two evils. That wasn't what was making me pause.

I stared at my ring. Half of me thought, *it's just a small piece of gold. It's just a thing.*

The other half said, *this is the ring that Leon gave you. You wear it because it's a symbol of his love. He gave you a ring. You gave him a ring. But you give each other more than that – and this ring is a symbol of that.*

I looked at Markham who'd unhesitatingly sabotaged the Security

Section's monitors – an offence probably punishable by death under Major Guthrie's jurisdiction.

I looked at Peterson, who'd insisted on coming. Yes, he'd spouted a lot of claptrap about Christmas traditions but if things went wrong, he had more to lose than any of us.

I thought of Elspeth Grey who was almost certainly finished at St Mary's but for whom a successful outcome today would mean the difference between leaving with dignity or in disgrace. Or with a possible prison sentence.

They were both looking at me. I knew neither of them would say anything. This was a personal decision.

I don't know why I hesitated. There really was no choice. It was the least I could do. I wriggled it off my finger and handed it to Markham to hand to the stallholder.

Peterson said quietly, 'Max, are you sure?'

'Yes,' I said, wondering what on earth I was going to say to Leon.

I saw it glint briefly, and then the stallholder magicked it away into some mysterious hiding place. Smiling hugely – I suspected we'd really been ripped off here – he handed Peterson the gun and, in a probably very unfamiliar fit of generosity, handed over the hideous amber beads as well. Peterson nodded his thanks, Markham shoved the gun down the front of his bed sheet – and it would be a brave as well as a foolish thief who followed it down there – and we left the market before anything else could go wrong.

Once out of the crowded streets, the air was a little fresher. I dropped the beads in the dust and we each took one of Markham's elbows and piloted him along the path back to the pod. Now that we had the bloody gun back, I just wanted to get him back to the pod as quickly as possible.

'I can see a rainbow,' he said at one point.

'Jolly good,' said Peterson.

He turned to look at me. 'So beautiful.'

'Thank you,' I said, touched.

'No, not you.'

I'm not sure why I didn't drop him there and then and just leave him to fester by the path.

'What's the matter with him?' said Peterson, trying to shoulder more of his uncoordinated weight.

'Not sure, but I think one or more of his stings may have become infected. He's certainly running a temperature. I can feel the heat coming off him.'

Our burden began to sing a song about throwing snowballs at the moon.

‘I’m not so sure,’ said Peterson. ‘Put him down a minute.’

We dropped him in the dust and bent over him for a quick examination. The only thing more inflamed than his eyes were his nostrils. In addition to his fading insect bites, none of which looked particularly infected, his skin was red and raw. In some places, it appeared to be splitting open.

Peterson stared at him thoughtfully. ‘If I didn’t know better I’d say he’d been poisoned.’

‘How? You and I are fine.’

‘No idea. Maybe he’s allergic to papyrus or something.’

‘How likely is that?’

‘Well, not very, but I can’t think of anything else. Everything we’ve done, he’s done. And vice versa.’

‘It must be a sting gone bad. He was covered in them. Maybe it’s the cumulative effect. Maybe I should have sprayed him twice a day but the can was only half full so I had to be careful with it.’

‘What spray?’

‘The insect repellent. In the blue and yellow can in the locker by the door.’

He sat back on his heels and stared at me. ‘Blue and yellow can?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘The insect repellent is in the orange and white can. Max, you’re not colour blind, are you?’

‘No. Definitely not. Not according to my eye test last year.’

I try to keep quiet about eye tests. Sometimes, I can’t always quite make out the small print. I usually nip into Sick Bay a couple of days beforehand and memorise the chart. It’s not that I can’t see – my eyesight is fine – it’s just that they make the print on these stupid cans so small these days.

He stared thoughtfully at me for a moment and then said, ‘Max, I think you might have been spraying him with WD40 by mistake.’

I stared at him. ‘Is that a problem? Leon swears by the stuff. That and duct tape are always his *tools du jour*.’

‘I daresay, but not in this context. Did you spray him all over?’

I nodded.

‘Help me get his clothes off. And for God’s sake hang on to that bloody gun. There’s no way I’m ever doing this again.’

We stripped off Markham and lugged him down to the river. The mud felt warm and squishy between my toes. We sat him down up to his neck in the water and gently washed his face and hair. I know, leptospirosis, leeches and all that, to say nothing of the Nile crocodiles, but as Peterson remarked, he smelled like an old engine and they probably weren’t that desperate for a meal.

I left him with Peterson, went back for his bed sheet and rinsed

that thoroughly as well, wondering how much it was going to cost me to keep Peterson quiet about his. I suspected his price would be high.

Still, we had the gun. Focus on the positive.

Markham lay happily on his back in the Nile, hands laced behind his head, feet waving in the gentle current, still singing away to himself. I wrung out his bed sheet; we heaved him out and endeavoured to make him decent again. Wet sheets aren't easy to handle. Wrapping a wet bed sheet around a damp and naked Markham was well nigh impossible. Especially since I had my eyes closed a lot of the time.

'You stand still, Max,' said Peterson eventually, exasperated. 'I'll just walk it around him. Like cling-film.'

There was a very minor argument as to whose fault it was that we forgot to leave his arms free, but we couldn't be bothered to do it again and, as Peterson said, it stopped him scratching.

'And he looks so clean, too,' I said, endeavouring to smooth down his spiky hair.

He smiled happily at the pair of us and threw up again.

Fortunately, the sun was setting as we made our way back to the pod. There's not much twilight at these latitudes. One minute it's light – the next minute it's nearly dark. Bashford's team had already returned to their pod. We snuck through the boatyard. Everyone seemed to be at the feast centred on the space where the barge had been. I stood for a moment, watching sparks from the fires flying up towards the stars, listening to the happy voices, smelling the savoury smells and then turned away into the night that now seemed even darker in comparison.

We whiled away the last hundred yards or so by making a list of things to do.

'Things to do,' said Peterson.

'Buy Markham a beer,' said a voice.

'Put the gun back,' I said. 'I'll do that since the young master can't even remember his own name at the moment. You get him up to Sick Bay, use your manly wiles on Helen, and impress upon her the need for complete secrecy. After I've been cleared, I'll go and talk to Dr Bairstow about what's happened. With luck he'll be so full of the Christmas spirit he'll forgive us everything.'

We both paused to contemplate this unlikely scenario.

'It'll be fine,' I said. 'I'll talk to him, emphasise the lack of Time Police in the whole affair, and try to persuade him to let us all live.'

'And Leon?'

I sighed. 'I won't lie to him. I would have told him anyway. And there'll be his pod to clean up – so guess how I'll be spending

Christmas morning. It's Ian who's going to be the problem. He's head of the Security Section, and somehow Grey got the gun out of his Armoury. He's her boyfriend and she's obviously never discussed her problem with him. He's not going to be a happy man on either count.'

'Neither am I. I'm the one who's going to have to tell Helen we've inadvertently poisoned Markham.'

'You shouldn't have to do that.'

'Fair division of labour, Max. You face Dr Bairstow. I'll face Dr Foster.'

'And just for once, young buggerlugs here is going to get off scot-free.'

'If you count petroleum distillate poisoning as scot-free.'

'Oh my God, is that what he's got?'

'Almost certainly. Skin lesions, fever, headache, nausea, disorientation, loss of balance.'

'Surely,' I said, conscience stricken, 'we didn't do all that. He had a lot of those symptoms before we set out.'

'True but I don't think we're going to be able to pass this off as sunstroke.'

'Door,' I said as we approached the pod.

We lowered the damp bundle of Markham to the floor where he began a long and involved conversation with someone called Rupert.

'Let's get this over with,' I said. 'Computer, initiate jump.'

'Jump initiated.'

The world went white.

After six days in the blazing hot sunshine, the murky chaos still reigning at St Mary's came as a bit of a culture shock.

'You get off to the Armoury while everyone's still busy sorting all this out,' said Peterson, heaving Markham to his feet again. 'Say goodbye to Rupert, young man. He can come out to play again tomorrow.'

I scrambled back into my original gear, stuffing the damp linen into a locker for future retrieval.

Judging by the racket coming from further down the building, the evacuation was over and people were pouring back in again.

I wiped the gun as best I could, entered the code for access into the Armoury, and squeezed through the door.

I'd just closed it behind me when the lights came on and there stood Leon and Major Guthrie.

Bollocks.

Everyone looked at everyone else and it was obviously all up to me.

I said, 'Good afternoon,' because there's no excuse for bad

manners.

There wasn't a huge response. They barely blinked. I couldn't deal with both of them together, so after an awkward pause I said, 'Major, I wonder if you could spare me a moment, please? Alone?'

There was another even more awkward pause, and then Leon unfolded his arms and silently left the room. I was in so much trouble.

'Before you start,' I said, and handed Guthrie the gun.

He stared at it but not for long. Ian Guthrie puts two and two together faster than any man I know.

'Why?' he said. 'Why did she take it? *Why would* she take it?'

'I think you need to talk to her, Ian. There are some problems there. It's my fault. I'm her department head. I should have realised what was happening.'

'And I'm her ...' he stopped. 'At least I thought I was.'

'I think you still are,' I said quickly. 'Her main fear was that you would find out.'

'In which capacity, he said bitterly. 'Head of Security or ...' he stopped again.

'As Ian Guthrie,' I said gently.

He locked the gun away, taking his time about it. When he turned back, his face was perfectly normal, if a little grim.

He said, 'Max ...'

'She can't stay here at St Mary's, Ian. It would be cruel to try and make her.'

'I know,' he said, heavily. He smiled bitterly. 'I think I had hoped for something of what you and Leon have but it doesn't look as if this particular story will have a happy ending.'

He straightened his shoulders. 'It looks as if we might have some decisions to make, doesn't it?'

'Something for you both to think about,' I said, 'but have Christmas first. New year – new beginnings.'

He nodded. 'Sound advice. And from an historian. Who'd have thought?'

I grinned at him. 'You already know what you're going to do, don't you?'

'I do, yes.' His rare smile lit up his face. 'You know what?' he said.

'What?'

'I think I shall miss you most of all, Scarecrow.'

Right, that was settled for the time being. Only several more problems to go.

'Very Christmassy,' said Helen, staring at our red noses. The standard of wit in Sick Bay is not high but this probably wasn't a

good time to mention that.

She indicated Markham. 'What have you done to him this time?'

Silently, Peterson handed over the can.

She took it, read the label, and rolled her eyes.

'How long's he been like this?'

'Only today, really,' said Peterson. 'And we dunked him in the Nile as soon as we discovered what we'd ... what had happened. So he's nice and clean, at least.'

'Just to be clear, you've added immersion in a parasite-riddled, leech-infested open sewer to his original symptoms?'

Put like that, it didn't sound good.

She glared impartially at the two of us. 'Two days' observation for both of you. Don't even think of trying to get out of it.'

We watched her wheel away a still chattering Markham, presumably to have his symptoms alleviated but you never knew with her.

'She's pleased to see me,' confided Peterson.

'How on earth can you tell?'

'I'm not dead.'

'Will you be telling her I was the one who poisoned Markham?'

'Not unless she turns ugly for some reason and I have to save myself.'

'You're a true friend, Tim.'

Grey, Bashford, Gallaccio, and Cox were waiting for me.

'We've warmed the bed for you,' said Bashford.

Grey said nothing, staring anxiously at me.

I put her out of her misery. 'It's OK. Problem solved. Gun recovered and returned.'

The collective sigh of relief nearly blew me off my feet.

'Thank you,' said Grey. 'Oh, thank you.'

'What happens now?' said Bashford.

'I'll go and see Dr Bairstow as soon as I can,' she said.

'I'd have a word with Major Guthrie first,' I said.

She paled. 'How much trouble am I in?'

'Not anything like as much as me, so stop worrying.'

'Max ...'

I remembered I was supposed to be head of the History Department and drew myself up. I'd like to think I loomed. I certainly gave looming my best shot.

'Listen to me, you lot. It's all sorted now, but if any of you ever, *ever* do anything like this again, I *will* kill you all. One by one. Slowly. And painfully. And I *will* get away with it because there are thousands of years of History out there, and I know exactly where to

bury the bodies. And what to say to Dr Bairstow afterwards. Now, go away and give me a moment's peace, please.'

They clattered out, leaving me alone in the ward. I was too strung up to get into bed, so I showered, washed the dust of Egypt out of my hair, put some cream on my nose, and sat in the window seat, looking out over the white gardens. Dusk was falling and the uncurtained windows were making pretty patterns of light on the snow. Someone had built an enormous snowman on the South Lawn. I'm almost certain the carrot is supposed to go on the face.

In the distance, I could see Atherton and Sykes trudging off through the snow. God knows what they were up to, but if it was anything illegal someone would be in to complain about it soon enough.

I heard the door open and close. Silence. I knew it was Leon. I sighed and struggled to marshal the words to explain what I'd done. How important it had been to get the gun back. How the fact that I'd given away my wedding ring didn't mean I didn't value it.

He came to sit opposite me in the window seat. 'Move your knees.'

I moved my knees and we sat together.

He picked up my hand and looked at the white line on my finger. 'Did you lose it?'

I shook my head. 'Worse. I gave it away.'

'Well,' he said comfortably, 'I expect it was for a good reason.'

I nodded. 'It was, but that doesn't mean I was happy to do it.'

'Why not? I thought to an historian, the preservation of the timeline was paramount.'

'It is, but these days I have other priorities as well.'

'Such as?'

'You. The two of us. Soon to be the three of us. I want you to know I didn't let it go lightly. I'm not sure how much I can say at the moment. How much I should say. I need to talk to Dr Bairstow, but I'm sorry Leon. I am really sorry.'

To my amazement, I felt a tear slide down my cheek.

He squeezed my hand. 'Don't cry.'

'I'm not crying. Pregnancy makes my eyes run.'

'Of course,' he said. 'I had stupidly forgotten that. Mention it to Dr Foster at your next ante-natal session.'

I sniffed, appreciating his efforts to comfort me. 'I haven't got over the last one yet. Helen and I watched a short film about childbirth and it was so gruesome we had to turn it off. She had a stiff drink, I had a cup of tea, and we swore we'd never have sex again.'

'You've had sex with Helen Foster?'

I managed a chuckle. 'Not recently.'

‘That’s better. Aren’t you going to open your Christmas present?’

‘I have a Christmas present?’

‘An early one.’ He grubbed around in his pocket, pulling out a huge red and gold striped rugby sock, which he dangled in front of me.

‘Thank you, I said, wondering why, out of the two of us, I was always the one who was reckoned to be slightly odd. ‘Am I supposed to wear it?’

‘It’s your Christmas stocking.’

‘It’s an old rugby sock.’

‘Not today it isn’t. Here. Merry Christmas. Sorry I didn’t have time for tangerines or nuts.’

I took the sock. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome.’

I regarded the sock.

‘Get a move on,’ he said, grinning.

‘What?’

‘Open your present.’

The sock wasn’t as empty as I thought. There was something in the toe. I rummaged around, pulling out a small box, which, according to the picture on the front, should be full of paperclips. If he’d been an historian, I would have suspected a surfeit of Christmas punch. Or possible concussion.

‘Well, go on. Open it.’

‘Now?’

‘I don’t think there will ever be a better time. I’m sorry it’s not wrapped, but I didn’t think you’d mind.’

I opened the box carefully and stared.

‘Well? Don’t you like it?’

Nestling on a bed of cotton wool was a wedding ring. My wedding ring.

I’m not often stuck for words but on this occasion, I just sat and stared, too afraid even to reach out and take it. Eventually, I dragged my eyes away to his face.

‘How did you know?’

‘Because I’m the dog’s bollocks,’ he said modestly. ‘Observing the big white mark on your finger, your guilty expression, and remembering Bashford and Grey’s recent jump, I leaped, gazelle-like, to the correct conclusion. Easy for a man of my talents.’

‘You mean you checked your pod logs.’

‘And that as well.’

‘You went back for it?’

‘I did. I simply retraced your jump and followed you following them. I made your stallholder an offer he couldn’t refuse and retrieved your ring.’

Wild thoughts ran through my mind. What had he done? Had we substituted the problem of the gun for something even worse? What had we left behind now?

‘Oh my God. Leon, what did you offer him?’

He smirked. ‘Three rolls of toilet paper.’

The afternoon began to take on a slightly surreal quality. ‘What?’

He repeated it patiently. ‘Three rolls of toilet paper. You know – “Property of St Mary’s” stamped on each sheet. Although God knows why. It’s not as if anyone has ever queried ownership. Either before or after use. I don’t know why on earth you didn’t think of it. A clear demonstration of the superiority of the technical mind I think even you must admit. Anyway, he was delighted. When I left, he was pulling off the individual sheets, one by one, to the huge admiration of those around him.’

Toilet rolls – enough of a novelty to be valuable and attractive and very biodegradable.

‘Leon, you are ...’ I stopped, unable to go on.

‘Yes? Don’t stop there.’

I shook my head.

‘You’re not going to cry again, are you?’

I shook my head.

‘Give me your hand.’

I stretched out my hand.

He slid it on to my finger. ‘Max, I give you this ring – again – because I love you. You are all the world to me and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.’

‘Leon, I take this ring – again – because I love you and ...’

I couldn’t go on. More pregnancy tears.

He cleared his own throat, dropped a kiss in my hair, and put his arm around me.

I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes. Suddenly, things didn’t seem so bad. Dr Bairstow would frown at me but I’d survive that. Elspeth Grey and Ian Guthrie would work something out. With luck, Helen would never know it was me who had inadvertently poisoned Markham.

And it was Christmas. It was snowing. St Mary’s smelled of good food. All my historians were home safe and sound, and I was here with Leon.

Sometimes – every now and then – there are moments of stillness. When nothing moves. When there is a sudden realisation of absolute happiness. A small, still moment to be remembered and cherished.

I burrowed deeper into his arms, enjoying his solid warmth. ‘So, apart from all that, how was your day?’

‘Well, someone hooked up the security monitors to every set of

fairy lights in the northern hemisphere and rigged the whole lot to blow the main fuse and set off the fire alarms ...'

I tutted at such misbehaviour.

'Someone else shoved half a ton of wet linen into a locker in my pod and it stinks to high heaven.'

I chirped sympathetically.

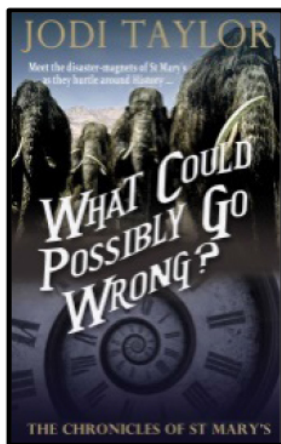
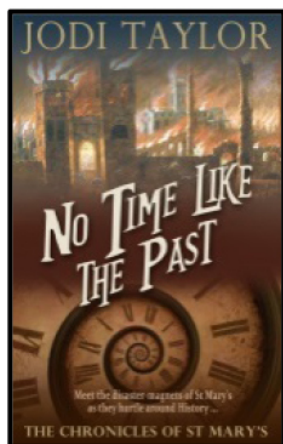
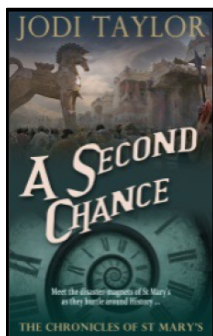
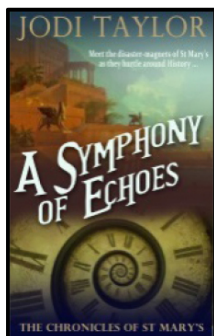
'My pod is filthy and reeks of people who haven't showered for a very long time.'

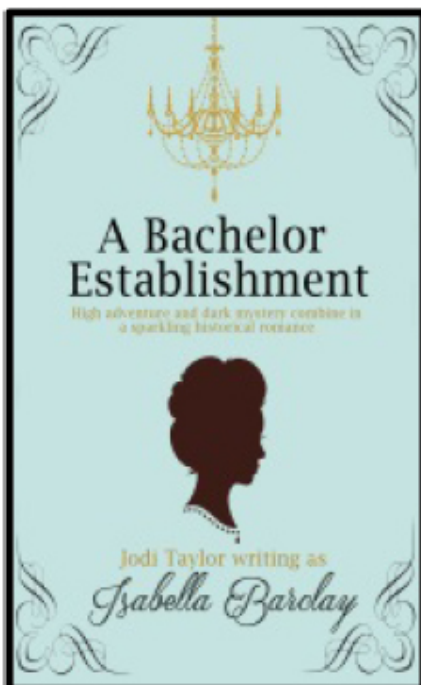
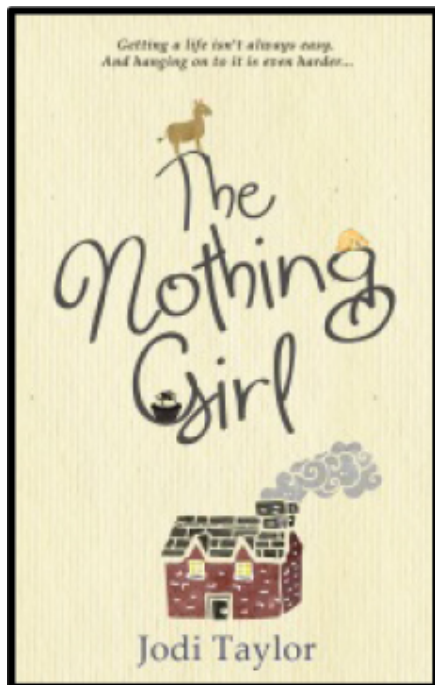
I indicated my astonishment.

'And some bugger's pinched my last can of WD40, but other than that ...'

**Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from everyone at St
Mary's**

Jodi Taylor





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Published by Accent Press Ltd 2015

ISBN 9781786151605

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